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Statement by Ambassador Richard Schifter, Alternate United States Representative to the United Nations for Security Council Affairs, in the Third Committee, on Agenda Item 87, Self-Determination, October 18, 1984

Mr. Chairman, as has from time to time been pointed out in this forum, one of the purposes of the United Nations, clearly set forth in the Charter, is "to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples." Self-determination of peoples is thus identified as one of the pillars on which a peaceful international order should rest.

Principles and broad concepts set forth in basic documents are usually not self-defining and can, thus, easily be the subject of differing interpretations. The principle of self-determination of peoples has not been an exception to this general rule. Over the years, the General Assembly has, therefore, grappled with this issue and has come up with resolutions which have sought to spell out with some precision just what it is that that term encompasses. It would be fair to say that this task of defining the concept has by no means been completed. Claims for the right of self-determination have been asserted which might require study as to whether or not that right has been properly invoked or in what manner it should be exercised. At the same time, there are other settings in which there is close to universal agreement that the assertion of the right is clearly proper and the end result required by justice is equally clear.

Self-determination of peoples is, as the phrase implies, a right enjoyed by persons as members of a group. It is a right which a person normally enjoys together with his neighbors, with persons with whom he or she shares a common language, culture or other form of association. What the phrase also implies is that any determination as to a group's destiny is ultimately made by the individual selves who make up the group, not by others for them. As our British colleague correctly noted in his intervention last week, the right of self-determination is inextricably tied to the right of persons freely to determine their political status.

One of the early formal enunciations of the concepts which I have just discussed and of the close tie between self-determination and government by consent of the governed is contained in our own Declaration of Independence. Let me, therefore, quote the words so well known to my countrymen:

When in the Course of human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the Separation.

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, the Pursuit of Happiness -- That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

I hope, Mr. Chairman, that we shall not be found guilty of ethnocentricity if we state our belief that these words, written 208 years ago, set forth truths of universal applicability, which are as relevant today as they were then.

It is because of our deep commitment to the principle of self-determination that the United States has been in the forefront of the advocates of its universality. It was President Wilson who included self-determination in the 14 points on which he expected peace to be based at the conclusion of the First World War. President Roosevelt, anticipating the end of the Second World War, and President Truman, who was in office then, were among those who gave strong support to the idea that decolonization must take place in the post-war period.

We need to take note, in this context, of the document on the subject of self-determination which has recently been circulated in this Committee by the Soviet Union: document A/C.3/39/3. Its four pages of prose do provide a certain amount of balance in that they contain, by my count, equal numbers of references to both the Soviet Union and the United States. However, while the references to the Soviet Union are understandably laudatory, it will not surprise anyone if I were to observe that the same cannot be said of the references to the United States. I am thus compelled to respond, so as to set the record straight.

The Soviet paper, Mr. Chairman, rightfully and understandably commences its discussion of specific situations, which involve violations of the right of self-determination, with a review of the case of Namibia. We fully agree that the problem of Namibia must be solved and must be solved in accordance with Security Council Resolution 435 by providing freedom and, with it, self-determination for the people of that country. The only issue, Mr. Chairman, is how this goal can best be attained.

The Soviet solution, Mr. Chairman, is one which in this country is colloquially described as "let's you and him fight."

We believe, Mr. Chairman, that there has been too much bloodshed in southern Africa as it is. What the United States is concentrating on is finding a peaceful road to freedom for Namibia by assisting the parties in the region to resolve their serious difficulties through negotiation.

During recent weeks, a good many of the delegations at this session of the General Assembly have had the opportunity of engaging in conversation with the persons in my government who are directly involved in the efforts to establish a process which would bring about the end result envisaged by Resolution 435. I recognize that some of the delegations have been skeptical as to whether the desired result can, in fact, be attained through the approach which we have adopted. We, in turn, cannot guarantee the result. But what we can say is that a serious effort is being made, which has the active involvement of some of the most senior statesmen of the region. There is a distinct possibility that we might succeed and if we, in fact, do, our approach will have proved to be far superior to one that calls only for more blood and tears.

The Soviet paper to which I referred earlier continues with a discussion of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Jurisdiction over this matter is, as we all know, vested in organs of the United Nations system other than the General Assembly, namely the Security Council and the Trusteeship Council. Let me, at this point, simply say that recent developments affecting the Trust Territory are entirely in keeping with Principle VII of the Annex to General Assembly Resolution 1541. That principle, we should note, provides for "free association (as) the result of a free and voluntary choice by the people of the territory concerned, expressed through informed and democratic processes."

Plebiscites have been held in Micronesia, in which the residents of these islands had the opportunity, in a free and secret balloting process, to make decisions on their future. Let me ask, Mr. Chairman, whether the residents of the Kurile Islands or of Southern Sakhalin, which, of course, are not under the Trusteeship system, ever had the opportunity to participate in a similar process of choosing their government.

Undeterred by the many explanations offered in the United Nations on the subject of Puerto Rico, the authors of the Soviet statement once again raise this issue under the rubric of self-determination. Let

me, therefore, state once again that the people of Puerto Rico choose their own government and have decided on the form of the relationship between that government, the government of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Federal Government of the United States. There exists to be sure, a Puerto Rican movement which calls for full independence. At the last general election, in 1980, the Gubernatorial candidate of the party supporting independence received 5.7 percent of the popular vote. In addition, periodic public opinion polls show that support for independence has consistently remained under 10 percent.

Opportunities for the Puerto Rican Independence Party to show its electoral strength recur, of course, periodically. As a matter of fact, the next such test of strength will take place in less than three weeks, on November 6. The candidates for Governor in that race are: Governor Carlos Romero Barcelo of the New Progressive Party, which is pledged to statehood; former Governor Rafael Hernandez Colon of the Popular Democratic Party, which advocates continued Commonwealth status; Mayor Hernan Padilla of the Popular Renewal Party, which also advocates statehood; and Professor Fernando Martin of the Puerto Rican Independence Party. According to the latest public opinion polls, Professor Martin is running fourth in that race. On November 7, we shall, of course, get the results of the best public opinion poll of them all, namely of a free election.

The special status of Puerto Rico, let me also emphasize, is a territorial status. Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, can move freely to other parts of the United States and when resident in such other parts have all the rights and obligations of other residents of the communities in which they live. A few years ago I was, in fact, present at an encounter on the floor of the United Nations Human Rights Commission when Congressman Robert Garcia, who represents a district in the Bronx with the largest concentration of voters of Puerto Rican origin, shook his finger at a Soviet delegate and said "We are as independent as we want to be. And if we want to get more independent we don't need your help."

And let me ask, at this point, when did the independence movement of Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania or, for that matter, of Bokhara last have a chance to test the strength of their respective independence movements at the ballot box?

The Central American and Middle Eastern questions touched on by the Soviet Union will be discussed in this and other fora of the General Assembly at a later date and will, for that reason, not be dealt with by us at this time. I do, however, want to make one exception by saying a few words concerning Grenada.

The developments in Grenada during the last year have demonstrated the validity of the statements which we made at the last session of the General Assembly. Grenada is a country which is today once again free. The dictatorship, which ruled it from 1979 to just about a year ago, came to a bloody end when its leaders had a falling out among themselves and took to killing each other. The

true right of self-determination has been restored to the people, who will have the opportunity to exercise it in free elections on December 3.

Only a brief mention was made in the Soviet statement of the subject of Afghanistan. And yet, if we consider the numbers of people killed, maimed or made homeless, including the numbers of Soviet soldiers killed and wounded, the tragedy of Afghanistan ranks among the most serious problems of concern to the international community today. In the close to five years since the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been reported killed and wounded. About 4 million Afghans are living as exiles outside their country; in addition, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been driven from their homes and now live in other parts of Afghanistan. At the same time, Soviet casualties are estimated at close to 8,000 dead and over 14,000 wounded.

And why are the people of Afghanistan forced to suffer so grievously? Because the Soviet Union was fearful that the Marxist/Communist government of Hafizullah Amin would not be able to survive the burgeoning indigenous resistance, so it insisted on installing a government in which it could have even greater confidence and control. Hafizullah Amin was, therefore, killed, so as to make way for Babrak Karmal, who was imposed upon the people of Afghanistan by Soviet bayonets, most clearly in violation of the principle of self-determination.

The foisting on them of a Soviet-imposed government turned out to be more than the people of Afghanistan were prepared to take. And so, for close to five years, they have resisted this latest Soviet effort to determine how and by whom their country is to be governed. As the Afghan struggle for self-determination continues, it remains our hope that the Soviet Union will reconsider and will respond more positively to the efforts of the Secretary General to bring peace to that strife-torn land, peace within the framework of the United Nations Charter.

Afghanistan's experience in having the Soviet Union attempt to impose a government on it is by no means unique. Note should be taken of three similar experiences to which neighbors of the Soviet Union were subjected over a period of about a quarter century, with effects which have lasted to the present day.

The first of these occurred in 1956, when Soviet troops were used to suppress the people of a country which had dared to install a Communist leader who did not have Moscow's blessings. Tanks were used to crush the brave efforts of that country's freedom fighters. In breach of a commitment made by the resident Soviet Ambassador, the country's leader, a lifelong Communist, was arrested and executed.

Twelve years later, in 1968, the world witnessed a repeat performance. There were, to be sure, some slight differences. The man who had assumed leadership of the Communist party of this second country had risen to his position with Moscow's blessing. But then

he began to effect reforms of which Big Brother disapproved. The new leader and his associates spoke of "socialism with a human face." It was evidently a phrase not liked in Moscow. Once again Soviet tanks crossed the Soviet border, and another neighboring people was crushed.

That lesson was well kept in mind by the leadership of a third country which, thirteen years later, pressed by a popular movement of extraordinary strength, had also agreed to institute reforms. By that time, in 1981, the lessons taught in 1956, 1968, and in 1979 in Afghanistan, had been learned. Rather than risk a Soviet invasion, the government of the country threatened by the Soviet Union in 1981 cracked down on its own people.

So as not to burden the Committee with exercises of the right of reply, I have not mentioned the names of the countries involved. Let me say, though, that anyone who believes the shoe fits should feel free to try it on.

Turning to another part of the world, Mr. Chairman, we cannot accept Vietnam's frequent references to the cruel record of the Pol Pot regime as a justification for its own aggression against the unfortunate people of Kampuchea. That aggression, we all know, culminated in the creation in Phnom Penh of a government whose strings are pulled in Hanoi, which exists at Hanoi's sufferance and maintains itself in office only with the support of the invading forces. Approximately six years have passed during which Vietnamese soldiers, now estimated to total more than 150,000, have occupied Kampuchea and imposed on that country the rule of government picked by the invaders and occupiers. Let us also note that the settlement by Vietnam of at least a half million of its own citizens within the territory of Kampuchea must raise serious questions about the long-range objectives of this foreign occupation.

This, then, is the pattern in which the Soviet Union and one of its close associates have dealt over the years with their neighbors, a pattern which clearly deviates from the goal of the Charter to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples. It is a pattern which, irony of ironies, is condemned in the penultimate paragraph of the statement distributed to us at the request of the Soviet delegation. That paragraph reads as follows:

"Completing the decolonization process and insuring the full realization of the right of peoples freely to determine their destiny continues to constitute one of the urgent tasks confronting the United Nations. The completion of that task is being impeded by those whose policies are defined by militarism, military preparations and force, those who cannot reconcile themselves to the most important trend of the present day -- the trend to the universal confirmation of the principles of national freedom and social justice."

Our only comment is: well said. Now let us hope that the Soviet Union is prepared to take this commentary to heart and act accordingly.